DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 252 854 CS 208 717

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TITLE A Perspecti e on Evaluating Spelling Programs.
PUB DATE [82]
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)
-- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; Educational Trends; Elementary Education; *Holistic Approach; Phonics; *Program Evaluation; Reading Instruction; Reading Processes; Spelling; *Spelling Instruction; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

While the look-say versus the phonics controversy has existed for years in reading instruction, a similar debate regarding spelling instruction is only now emerging out of the literature and into the hands of the classroom teacher. "Subskill" spelling, most frequently found in current spelling programs, presumes that good spelling is achieved by learning the 200 or more rules governing the 500 or more different ways of writing the 44 speech sounds using 26 letters. "Holistic" spelling, analogous to reading's look-say method and rarely found in commercial materials, basically rejects the rules approach. It views spelling as a visual processing task: each word has its own unique feature to be learned, and rules governing the spelling of one sound may not apply to other words with identical sounds. Students in holistic spelling programs initially complete a pretest to identify words already known, then employ a look, say, write, and self-correct procedure on words they need to learn--a process repeated until mastery is achieved. Research literature projects great support for holistic spelling instruction, yet an evaluation of 11 widely used elementary commercial programs showed that only one was holistic, and five involved a mixture of holistic and subskill strategies. It is predicted that disenchantment with current spelling programs, declining achievement scores, and the trend toward holistic reading instruction will provide new impetus for a resurgence in holistic spelling instruction. (Author/HTH)

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A PERSPECTIVE ON EVALUATING SPELLING PROGRAMS

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INTRODUCTION

During the many years of debate over how reading should be taught, a quiet but similar debate has been brewing in the curriculum area of spelling. This controversy involves two opposing views concerning methods of teaching spelling. To borrow from the field of reading, I shall refer to one as the "subskill" method and to the other as the "holistic" method. Proponents of subskill spelling suggest that the major emphasis in spelling instruction should be on learning some 200 or more rules and exceptions governing the 500 or more different ways of writing the 44 speech sounds using 26 letters. On the other hand, those who support holistic spelling instruction suggest that the rules for English spelling are so complex and inconsistent that the direct study of words in their gestalt or whole form is far more effective than learning rules for spelling which may apply to one set of words but not to another set even though both may have identical sounds.

When spelling programs are evaluated in relation to this dichotomy, they appear to fall into one of three categories--subskill emphasis, holistic emphasis, or eclectic, the latter appearing to combine features of both the subskill and holistic methods.

← subskill ← ← eclectic ← → holistic →

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There are definite characteristics associated with each of these methods and, through a careful evaluation of their organization and activities, spelling programs can normally be classified into one of the these categories. The purpose of this article is to discuss those characteristics, present a rating scale for categorizing spelling programs, and report the results of a study of 11 elementary spelling programs that were evaluated using the rating scale.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUBSKILLS SPELLING

Subskill spelling is defined as instruction that is based on the learning of a hierarchically ordered phoneme-grapheme rule system which, when properly used, produces correct spelling. Supporters of the subskill method suggest there is surprising consistency in phoneme-grapheme or sound-spelling correspondence which supports instruction in the rules of spelling. Studies by Hanna and Moore (1953) and Hanna and Hanna (1965) have been credited as having produced some of the more elaborate arguments for the teaching of spelling rules. Much of their argument was substantiated by an extensive study at Stanford University (Hanna et al., 1964) in which 17,000 words were computer analyzed for spelling consistency. According to this study, the proper application of a "devised set of rules" showed that 49 percent of the 17,000 words could be spelled correctly without error, 37 percent could be spelled with one error, 11 percent could be spelled with two possible errors, and about 3 percent of the words could be spelled with three or more errors. These results led Hodges and Rudorf (1965) to suggest that knowledge of a limited number of rules could provide the writer with the ability to spell literally thousands of words correctly.

Evaluation of the more popular spelling programs used in this country will reveal two important facts. First, the overwhelming majority of programs are based primarily on the subskill method. As early as 1931 Sartorius found that 18 of the 20 spellers evaluated were subskill oriented. More recently, Stetson and Lyman (1981) reported that 44 of 52 spellers they surveyed were subskill oriented. Second, what Hodges and Rudorf meant by a limited number of rules--which could aid in correct spelling--has been interpreted in more recent years to mean a large number of rules. For example, in Sartorius's 1931 study, the largest numer of rules fund in any program was 48. In Stetson and Lyman's study of 1981, the elementary spellers introduced an average of 30 or more rules per year which proliferated to as many as 200 rules between grade one and grade six.

There are particular aspects of spelling programs which characterize them as being subskill oriented. Several are identified here:

1. In some programs, lessons might focus on a specific rule of spelling and the words in that lesson illustrate that rule. For example, if the rule pertains to the medial short-vowel sound, the words presented might include sat, met, trim, pod, and sun.
2. In other programs, lessons might focus on a particular sound pattern and the words in that lesson would be illustrations of the various ways that the sound could be spelled. For example, if the long sound of a is presented, the words in that lesson might include make, eight, say, steak, stain, gauge, vein, they, etc.
3. Lessons tend to de-emphasize pretesting prior to instruction since practice with all words is assumed to aid in the learning of the rule presented. Pretesting may be found on Wednesday or Thursday and referred to as a "check point" or "trial" test.

4. Activities involving learning the meaning of prefixes, suffixes, and roots are often included, based on the notion that knowledge of word meaning aids in correct spelling.
5. Exercises involving context clues, cloze, and other fill-in-the-blank activities are usually included since the use of words in context is believed to aid in correct spelling.
6. Final lesson tests often include sentence dictation in addition to, or in lieu of, writing words in isolation. Sentence dictation is thought to provide practice in spelling words correctly in written connected discourse.
7. Dictionary practice such as looking-up word meanings, variant meanings, alphabetizing, and use of diacritical marks is often included based on the assumption that such practice improves spelling ability.
8. Lessons often contain a separate list of words which represent exceptions to the spelling rule presented to illustrate that some words with the same sounds have spelling patterns that do not fit the rule.
9. Lessons often contain a small group of words referred to as "demon words," "watch-out words," "snerk words," "wow words," or other terms used to describe words containing particular hard spots with the difficult portion highlighted in some manner.
10. Some subskill programs include activities called "dictionary spelling" in which words or sentences are presented in their dictionary or phonetic spelling. The student must translate such spellings into the regular or traditional spelling. In at least one program, the final weekly tests always contain several sentences in which all

of the words are written phonetically and the student is instructed to write the correct translation.

CHARACTERISTICS OF HOLISTIC SPELLING

The holistic spelling method is defined as instruction which emphasizes looking at the whole word, pronouncing the word, visualizing the word with eyes closed, covering the word and writing the word, checking for accuracy, and repeating the process until the word is learned. There is little room for rule emphasis in holistic instruction. Proponents suggest that the number of rules that are typically introduced has gotten totally out of hand. Only a relatively few rules, perhaps 6 or so, are consistently predictive enough to be taught. If the same amount of time spent learning rules could be spent on direct study of words, spelling achievement would be higher. As early as 1919 Earnest Horn cast doubts that the learning of rules could replace direct instruction. He suggested that, in order for any spelling rule to be worth teaching, it must be shown that "(the) rule can be easily taught, that it will be remembered, and that it will function in the stress of actual spelling. Evidence seems to cast a doubt on all three of these assumptions" (in Fitzsimmons and Loomer, 1978, p. 19):

> Forty years later E. Horn (1960) listed evidence to show the limitations of teaching rules in spelling. He claimed that: (1) one-third or more of words have more than one acceptable pronunciation; (2) many different spellings can be given most sounds; (3) a majority of words contain silent letters; (4) responses become uncertain when more than one reasonable choice is available; (5) unstressed syllables, particularly the schwa and short i sound, are very hard to spell by sound: and (6) any spelling rule can be used incorrectly as well as correctly (p. 1345).

In evaluating spellers based on the holistic method, some of the following characteristics may be found:

1. Pretesting prior to any instruction is a high priority. This is based on the belief that studying words already known is a waste of time and when study time is concentrated only on unknown words, those words can be learned in half the time that normally would be required when all words are studied.
2. Words within lessons are selected because of their frequency of use or need to be learned and not because they have similar sound or letter patterns.
3. While rules may be presented, only those rules of highest predictability are emphasized. Often the rules are contained only in the teachers manuals and are taught secondarily to the direct teaching of words.
4. A system for self-study of words is usually emphasized and time is provided within each lesson for self-study.
5. The primary emphasis in learning words is on visual imagery and visual memory. The method proposed by Fitzgerald (1951) is the one most often taught. He suggested that, if we want learn to spell a word, we should a) look at and pronounce the word, b) spell the word, c) write the word, d) correct the word, and e) repeat if necessary.
6. A heavy emphasis is placed on immediate feedback and self-correction based on T. Horn's (1947) summary of research in spelling which concluded that self-correction may be "the best single factor contributing to success of achievement in spelling..." (pp. 566-567).

7. Final dictation tests usually require the student to write the words in isolation. They tend to avoid sentence dictation which is viewed by holistic proponents as being an exercise in sentence memory more than an exercise in spelling.
8. Lessons usually de-emphasize context clues or cloze activities and, in their place, emphasize the writing of phrases and sentences in some creative writing activity.
9. Activities which aid the student in visualizing words are usually found such as word configurations, anagrams, and visualizing large word parts such as prefixes, suffixes, and roots.
10. The recycling of students through lessons, carrying misspelled words forward to the next lesson, and allowing for the inclusion of words from sources other than the spelling programs are encouraged.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ECLECTIC SPELLERS

According to the dictionary, eclectic means to select and use what seems best from various sources. In our case, developing an eclectic program by incorporating the "very best" from both holistic and subskill approaches would be analogous to mixing oil and water. For example, if one combines the most exemplary subskill strategy, learning rules, with the most exemplary holistic strategy which is merely to write and self-correct words, one could argue that one strategy is in total contradiction to the other. Another possible contradiction would be the combining of pretesting prior to instruction to avoid the study of words already known (holistic strategy) with practicing all words in a variety of activities whether the words are known or not (subskill strategy). A third contradiction, found in almost all spelling series, is introducing only those words whose meaning is already well known by the student (holistic strategy) and then providing one activity after another in which the focus is on word meaning (subskill strategy).

The truth of the matter is that the characteristics of holistic and subskill spelling are so dichotomous that attempts to produce the ideal eclectic spelling program would be most difficult. This is an obvious problem for the two dozen or more publishers who compete for adoption by state textbook committees and school districts throughout the country. Because publishers are motivated primarily by sales, they want to insure that their program contains the strategies that will satisfy the evaluators, regardless of their individual bias. While it might be feasible to delicately fuse some of the best holistic and subskill strategies into something approaching an eclectic program, Harris and Hodges (1981) have advanced clear warning that "often, an eclectic approach or method implies no method at all, in that pieces and parts of many programs (or approaches) may be taken up and dropped with no overriding philosophy (justification) or sequence" (p.98.)

DETERMINING THE INSTRUCTIONAL EMPHASIS OF PROGRAMS

Recently Stetson and Boutin (1982) developed an evaluation instrument which could be used to determine whether spelling programs followed a subskill, holistic, or eclectic method of instruction. This instrument, the Spelling Program Effectiveness Rating Scale (SPERS) contains 24 declarative statements related to the instructional materials which can be answered with a YES or NO by examining lessons in the speller. Twelve of the statements are characteristics of subskill instruction and the other 12 are characteristics of holistic instruction. If the answer to any statement is YES, and a YES response is characteristic of subskill spelling, the YES is located in the Subskill Scale column and the NO is located in the Holistic Scale column. On the other hand, if the YES response is characteristic of the holistic approach, the YES will appear in the Holistic Scale column. Table 1 presents

the 24 statements and the YES and NO responses in the appropriate column. In the SPERS instrument itself, each statement is thoroughly explained and the evaluator is given specific instructions on how to determine whether the answer to each statement should be YES or NO.

Table 1

In using the SPERS it is suggested that the evaluator randomly select five lessons scattered throughout the speller. For each of the 24 statements, all five lessons are examined. If the statement applies to 2 or more of the lessons (40 percent or more of the lessons), the YES response should be circled for that statement. If the statement applies in less than 2 of the 5 lessons, the NO response to that statement should be circled. Once all 24 statements have been evaluated, the number of circled responses in each of the two scales are totaled and then doubled to achieve a total score for the Subskill Scale and a total score for the Holistic Scale. The combined score for the two scales must add up to 48 points.

A high score on the Subskill Scale with a corresponding low score on the Holistic Scale would be interpreted to mean that the program tends to follow the subskill method. A high score on the Holistic Scale with a corresponding low score on the Subskill Scale would mean that the instructional approach of that program followed a holistic method. When the scores are somewhat comparable on both scales, the program would more likely be described as eclectic since it posseses about an equal number of characteristics from both the subskill and the holistic approaches.

EVALUATION OF ELEVEN SPELLING PROGRAMS USING THE EVALUATION SCALE

To test the Spelling Program Effectiveness Rating Scale (SPERS), 11 elementary spelling programs were evaluated. Each of the 24 declarative statements were answered as YES or NO for each program. Table 2 presents the results of the total scores on the Subskill Scale and the Holistic Scale for each of the 11 programs.

Table 2

In comparing scores among the 11 programs, the three categories of spelling seem to emerge rather clearly. One program (Curriculum Associates) had such a high score on the Holistic Scale and such a low score on the Subskill Scale that it stood alone from all other programs as being heavily based on holistic instruction. In fact, an examination of the teacher's manual for this program showed that special efforts were taken to not only identify their program as holistic (even though they did not call their method holistic), but to discuss in great detail the theoretical and empirical literature which supported their view. Curiously, only 3 of the 11 programs ever cited research to support their approach.

The second group of five programs--numbers 2 through 6 in Table 2--appear to have somewhat comparable scores on both the Subskill Scale and the Holistic Scale which categorizes them as eclectic in their approach since they tend to use strategies associated with both approaches. A careful item-by-item analysis would need to be conducted on these programs in order to determine whether the strategies actually used are considered to be among the more important strategies espoused by both holistic and subskill methods. For

example, in several teacher's guides, the use of the pretest prior to instruction was mentioned. Yet, no details were provided to the teacher about how the pretest could be used or what could be done for students scoring high on the pretest. Furthermore, the student materials were clearly set up for the pretest only after two or three days of instruction. In all five of the so-called eclectic programs, a short explanation or note to the student was included, usually prior to the first lesson, about how they could self-study words using a look-say-spell-write-check system (holistic approach). However, only one of the programs ever made reference to self-study again, either in the teacher's guide or in any of the weekly lessons. These may be examples of providing lip service to a holistic practice and, at the same time, discouraging their use by not building in time for such practice through the course of the lessons. Another example of lip service without substance relates to the attention given in the manuals to alternative management strategies. While all authors claimed that their programs could be used not only for whole class instruction but in a variety of alternative situations such as ability groups, peer teaching, and individualized study, only four of the 11 programs provided details for the teacher who desired management strategies other than whole class instruction. The remaining programs explained only whole class management strategies which could easily be interpreted by teachers to mean that all students should be working on the same activity of the same lesson on the same day of the week, regardless of the range of student abilities. More than likely, Harris and Hodges would use these examples as illustrations of so called eclectic programs that contain a little of everything and not much of anything.

The scores on the final five programs--numbers 7 through 11 in Table 2--appear to have significantly higher scores on the Subskill Scale than on the

Holistic Scale which would characterize these programs as having a subskill emphasis. These programs tend to place a heavier emphasis on the learning of rules, exceptions to rules, studying hard spots in words, completing context clue exercises, and studying the dictionary or phonetic spelling of words. Interestingly, the program of McGraw-Hill and that of Curriculum Associates appear to be the best examples of the two opposing views. In that respect, if one wishes to evaluate a program which relies heavily on either the subskill or the holistic methods, these two programs may be considered ideal examples of each approach.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Like the great debate in reading, spelling instruction appears to be emerging with a similar dichotomy--the subskill or rules approach versus the holistic or visual approach. Subskill spelling tends to view spelling as the utilization of a comprehensive set of spelling rules which, when properly employed, produces correct spelling. The primary basis or support for subskill spelling comes from the works of P.R. Hanna (1965), Hanna and Moore (1953), and Hanna and others (1964). Holistic spelling, on the other hand, is based on the belief that direct study of the word as a total entity is the most productive and efficient way to spell correctly. The basis or support for holistic spelling is the work of Earnest Horn (1919; 1954; 1960), Thomas Horn (1969), Fitzsimmons and Loomer (1978), and J. A. Fitzgerald (1951) whose look, say, see, write, and self-correct technique has become the primary method for learning how to spell.

The Spelling Program Effectiveness Rating Scale (SPERS) developed by Stetson and Boutin (1982) was used in a study of 11 basal spelling programs to determine their philosophical base. While one program was identified as

holistic, five were categorized as subskill oriented and five others were classified as eclectic. The reader is cautioned to look carefully at those eclectic programs that claim to incorporate the best of all approaches. In their attempts to satisfy everyone's personal bias toward spelling, they may have produced programs which, according to Harris and Hodge, may contain no method at all.

In the meantime, it is hoped that the information provided here will aid evaluators in placing spelling programs in their proper perspective. And let everyone be forwarned that, while holistic programs are few in number, disenchantment with many currently adopted programs, declining achievement scores in spelling, and a swing toward more holistic instruction in reading is providing great impetus for a resurgence in holistic spelling. Furthermore, more and more school districts will abandon commercially produced programs altogether in favor of locally produced spelling lists developed from the curriculum. As soon as a sufficient amount of research filters down to a sufficient number of classroom teachers--most authorities believe that research in spelling is one of the best kept secrets--pressure will be brought to bear on publishers to produce programs that can be substantiated in the literature as well as in the classroom. A major swing toward more holistic, as well as eclectic programs of demonstrated quality, will occur in the mid to late 1980's.

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TABLE 1. TWENTY-FOUR STATEMENTS RELATED TO SPELLING PROGRAMS WITH YES AND NO RESPONSES PLACED IN THE SUBSKILL OR HOLISTIC SCALE COLUMNS.

	STATEMENT RELATED TO STUDENT MATERIALS	HOLISTIC RATING SCALE	SUBSKILL RATING SCALE
1.	Pretest prior to any instruction	YES	NO
2.	Words presented in column form	YES	NO
3.	Words grouped by sound or letter pattern	NO	YES
4.	Words grouped by frequency of use	YES	NO
5.	"Look-say-write-correct" is explained	YES	NO
6.	"Look-say-write" is used regularly	YES	NO
7.	Concentrate only on misspelled words	YES	NO
8.	Rules stated or implied in each lesson	NO	YES
9.	Words written 3 or more times for practice	NO	YES
10.	Written dictation & self correction	YES	NO
11.	Word visualizing activities	YES	NO
12.	Learning meanings of roots, prefixes, etc.	NO	YES
13.	Context clues, cloze activities, etc.	NO	YES
14.	Words written in isolation on final test	YES	NO
15.	Sentence dictation on final test	NO	YES
16.	Translating dict. spelling to traditional spelling	NO	YES
17.	Using words in creative writing activities	YES	NO
18.	Studying hard spots in words	NO	YES
19.	Exceptions to rules are discussed	NO	YES
20.	Translating dictionary spelling on final test	NO	YES
21.	Handwriting or letter formation practice	NO	YES
22.	Dictionary practice	NO	YES
23.	Misspelled words carried forward & tested	YES	NO
24.	Words added from other sources	YES	NO

TABLE 2. RATINGS OF 11 SPELLING PROGRAMS BASED ON THE 24 STATEMENTS OF THE SPELLING PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS RATING SCALE (SPERS)

	PUBLISHER	SUBSKILL RATING SCALE	HOLISTIC RATING SCALE	
1.	Curriculum Associates	8	40	holistic
2.	Follett	20	28	
3.	Harcourt Brace & Jovanovich	22	26	
4.	Laidlaw	22	26	eclectic
5.	American Book	24	24	
6.	Scott Foresman	24	24	
7.	Economy	30	18	
8.	Harper and Row	30	18	subskills
9.	Silver Burdett	30	18	
10.	Rand McNally	32	16	
11.	McGraw-Hill	40	8	
	Mean Scores	25.6	22.4	

1. Maximum score for any program is 48 points total.
2. High scores on Holistic Scale indicate that the program is based on holistic approach.
3. High score on Subskill Scale indicates that the program is based on subskill approach.
4. Comparable scores on both scales indicate that the program is likely eclectic.

ABSTRACT

A PERSPECTIVE ON EVALUATING SPELLING PROGRAMS

While the look-say versus the phonics controversy has existed for years in reading, a similar debate regarding spelling instruction is only now emerging out of the literature and into the hands of the classroom teacher.

"Subskill" spelling, most frequently found in present-day spelling programs, presumes that good spelling is achieved by learning the 200 or more rules governing the 500 or more different ways of writing the 44 speech sounds using 26 letters. Thus, students are preoccupied with learning rules and writing speech sounds in different ways. Pretesting is usually discouraged since practice with words, whether known or not, is considered to be necessary to master the rule and/or sound spelling pattern.

"Holistic" spelling, analogous to reading's look-say method and rarely found in commercial materials, basically rejects the rules approach. Rather, spelling is viewed as a visual processing task, that each words his its own unique feature to be learned, and that rules governing the spelling of one sound may not apply to other words with the identical sound [e.g., eight, ate, pray, gauge, prey, etc.]. Consequently students in holistic spelling programs initially pretest to identify words already known, then employ a look, say, write, and self-correct procedure on words that need to be learned -- a process repeated until mastery if achieved.

A review of the literature projects great support for holistic spelling instruction and far less support for subskill spelling instruction. Yet, an evaluation of 11 widely-used elementary commercial programs using the Spelling Program Effectiveness Rating Scale - SPERS (Stetson and Boutin, 1982) showed that five were found to be subskill in nature, one was holistic, and the remaining five were classified as "eclectic", a term used to describe programs whose contents involve such a mixture of holistic and subskill strategies that their philosophical foundation is suspect.

It is predicted that disenchantment with currently adopted programs, declining achievement scores, and a trend for more holistic emphasis in reading instruction will provide new impetus for a resurgence in holistic spelling instruction.